

Statement by David Kuo
Contributing Editor, Beliefnet.com
Former Deputy Director, White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

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Chairman Mark E. Souder, 109th Congress

“Authorizing the President's Vision: Making Permanent The Faith-Based and Community Initiative - H.R. 1054, The Tools for Community Initiatives Act.”

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Chairman Souder, Representative Cummings, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on H.R. 1054, The Tools for Community Initiatives Act.

My perspective on the topics we discuss today is informed by various vantage points on faith, politics, and social service I've had during the past 15 years. I was John Ashcroft's Policy Director in the Senate when we wrote “charitable choice,” an amendment designed to end government discrimination against faith-based social service organizations. I founded, and for three years built a charitable organization to objectively determine the efficacy and the efficiency of social service organizations. For two-and-a-half years I served as Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives under President George W. Bush.

But more than anything, my views are informed by a certain philosophical perspective; I believe in government's inviolable duty to help the poor. This isn't just a political philosophy for me; it's also theology. I believe that Jesus' command to care for the least among us means that we have to bring to social problems every available resource and every best effort. No country can do that better than America and no country *needs* to do it better than America.

What seems like a long time ago in a galaxy far, far, far away, a Texas governor gave one of the great political speeches of this generation in Indianapolis, Indiana. In it, Governor George W. Bush talked about how the promise of America was a distant dream for too many who were addicted to drugs, dependent on alcohol, and trapped in despair. He said that the answer didn't lie in trillions of new Washington dollars spent on a big bureaucracy to end poverty as we know it. The answer also didn't lie in shrugging our collective shoulders and letting the ‘private sector’ handle it all devoid of new resources. What America needed to do, he said, was to embrace and generously fund social service organizations –faith-based and secular –to help hurting Americans.

His prescription was straightforward. Certain laws, rules, and regulations amounted to government-sanctioned discrimination against faith-based groups. They needed to be changed. Social service groups needed to know that they were welcome to apply for funds. At the same time, he added passionately, "It is not enough for conservatives like me to praise charitable efforts. Without more support and resources, both public and private, we are asking charities to make bricks without straw."

On that day he proposed \$8 billion per year in new spending and charitable tax incentives and sent the unmistakable message that charity, compassion and care for the poor were to be cornerstones of his domestic policy.

A great deal of what he envisioned has come to pass. There is a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and there are coordinating centers in most major federal agencies. Tens of thousands of people have been educated about how to apply for government funds and what they can and cannot do with those funds. Grants have been given out to scores of different organizations and small pilot projects to assist children of prisoners, mentoring, and drug addicts have been launched. Most importantly, an irreversible message has been heard across the country – faith-based groups are fully welcome, fully legal, and absolutely necessary to America's fight against poverty. Were it not for President Bush's vision we would not be meeting here today.

At the same time, the core funding commitment he made in Indianapolis has not been fulfilled. Four years later, rather than \$32 billion in new spending and tax incentives for the poor we've seen a few hundred million at best. There is a chasm between what was promised and what has been delivered that cannot be glossed over by any new White House reports, initiatives, policies, conferences, speeches, pronouncements or purportedly objective data collection intended to make the failure look better. It can only be bridged by the fulfillment of the original promise. I still believe that the promise will be fulfilled.

The failure to deliver the promised financial support for the poor lies equally on the executive and legislative branches of government. The White House could certainly have done more and hopefully will do more to push through needed funding increases to address record American poverty. But at least the White House has tried.

From where I sit I cannot say the same thing about most of Congress. I have been saddened by widespread congressional apathy and the desire for political gamesmanship rather than substantive aid. Why hasn't Congress been the compassionate advocate on behalf of charities and the poor in the midst of an economic crisis, a downturn in charitable giving, and an upturn in social service needs?

When the President announced the creation of the Faith-Based Office in 2001 he was attacked by some Democratic members of Congress as 'trying to destroy the wall between the separation of church and state.' Others said the White House was trying to turn America into Bob Jones University. Still others that the White House was just trying to discriminate against racial minorities, women, or members of the GLBT community. Even when distinguished members stood up against this bombast and sided with President Bush

they were threatened by members of their own caucus that their personal campaign funds would be cut, someone else would be supported in a primary against them, and they had to publicly retract their support. It seemed like the president's bold support of this Initiative was seen by many as a chance to hurt him and label him as a religious zealot and the poor were used as pawns in a greater political game of power.

At the same time, many members of the president's own party expressed equal parts apathy and antipathy towards this agenda. Money for the poor? Why it will just get wasted, they said. We just need to cut funds and let the private sector take over. We don't need more funds all we really need to do is make sure that we have a huge political fight over religious charities right to hire and fire based on their own faith. That way Republicans will be seen as fighting for religion and Democrats will be seen as fighting against it. "It is a good fight to have," I heard time and again. A good fight for partisanship perhaps, but less good for the poor. I once asked a senior staff member in Republican leadership to name the five people in the party whose primary agenda was serving the poor, this person shrugged and looked at a colleague. That person shrugged as well. "We don't know one," they replied. Had there been a pittance of passion for securing funding for social service organizations so much could have been accomplished.

Some people have said that this is just the way of modern Washington. We haven't seen the promises fulfilled because for the White House, for Democrats, for Republicans, for liberal and conservative special interest groups there is more to be gained by fighting than by solving.

I don't believe that is true. Everything that hasn't yet been accomplished can still be accomplished. Funding for things like CDBG can be returned to their needed levels, the Compassion Capital Fund can receive the \$200 million per year it was promised to help support the work of small, urban center organizations that have been ignored for so long. Tax incentives to aid the poor can be put in place. There is no such thing as too late because there are always lives that can be helped. Impossible? Hardly. The mere fact that we are meeting together today demonstrates this subcommittee's passion for the poor and willingness to stand up to opposition from those who don't want hearings like this to take place.

I'd like to make three specific suggestions for moving forward before I close:

First, the subcommittee should seek to expand its oversight on the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. There are important questions that need to be answered about how decisions are made regarding funding, what relationship the Office has in directly controlling the activities of other federal agencies, as well as examining the veracity of reports claiming that a certain amount of money is going to faith-based groups. These are important matters and need to be examined.

Second, I encourage the subcommittee to begin looking at information in different ways. To date, charities tend to be judged by how well their accountants make their books look like all the money is going to serve targeted populations. Why? Because that's how

efficient charities are judged and have been ranked by media like *U.S. News and World Report*. Unfortunately, this mindset has prevented us from asking a more important question: how well? Efficacy is a far more important and relevant age than efficiency. We need to begin asking charities to tangibly measure how well they are doing their jobs, not just how efficiently. We need to ask government that question as well. It is a tough job because it is hard to get at the answer and because the answers could be very unsettling. However, it is one of the most important questions that can be asked.

Third, challenge your leadership to move beyond the easy sound bites about religion and politics and engage in a passionate effort to improve the lives of the poor. Of course we aren't all going to agree on the solutions. But solutions need to be the focus and not just bashing the other side because we're hurt, angry, or confused.

I want to close by again thanking you Chairman Souder and the subcommittee for continuing to examine the complex issues surrounding the Faith-Based and Community Initiative. The debates are vigorous and that is the way they should be. Thank you.